
Combined Exercises: A Security Cooperation Tool

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Lieutenant Colonel Silvas, ARFOR Commander, addressing the IV 2007 participants during JTF-B welcome brief at the base theater.

When we think of security cooperation (SC) many of the things that come to mind are humanitarian assistance, demining operations, counternarcotics, counterterrorism, among a growing number of programs. Another key component is combined exercises, whether joint or multinational. Each of the combatant commands (COCOMs) develop Theater Security Cooperation Strategies that may include exercises based on their areas of operations and emphasis. This article will focus on the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), and a joint exercise which was recently completed.

Admiral Stavridis', the SOUTHCOM commander, plans for the region include a strong International Partnership Program. One of the elements of this partnership is an exercise that supports this program called "Iguana Voladora." (IV). IV is a multinational parachute jump held once a year, sponsored by SOUTHCOM, operated and hosted under the control of Joint Task Force-Bravo, (JTF-B) located at Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras.

This combined exercise is a multinational airborne operation designed to bring representatives from the nations within North America, Central America, and South America together in a neutral setting in order to stimulate operations between these nations and better effect "progress through unity", which is the the JTF-B's motto.

These yearly airborne operations, began in August of 1997, when only three partners participated: Guatemala, Honduras, and the United States. In April 1998, the total participating nations were five and by June 1999 there were six participating nations. Unfortunately, in March of 2000 only four nations participated and no multinational exercise was hosted in 2001. In April 2002, JTF-B

re-instituted the multinational jump exercise with six participants, and named the operation Iguana Voladora or translated in to English “The Flying Iguana”. The name has remained since. The Iguana Voladora Air Base operations have taken place every year since with the following countries participation in 2003.

- El Salvador
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Mexico
- The United States

In 2004 the following countries participated:

- Bolivia
- Ecuador
- El Salvador
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Mexico
- Nicaragua
- The United States

Most impressive was the total participating countries for this year’s multinational jump conducted 30 April through 4 May 2007. A grand total of fourteen nations were represented:

- El Salvador
- Belize
- Bolivia
- Costa Rica
- Ecuador
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Mexico
- Nicaragua
- Panama
- Paraguay
- Peru
- Uruguay
- The United States

The Military Group Commander for Nicaragua was not only present during this event, but also jumped with the Nicaraguan paratroopers. Recognizing that not all military group commanders can attend and also jump, this level of participation is particularly relevant from both a partnership and a leadership perspective.

This year, the combined exercise consisted of various activities starting with the arrival of the delegates, followed by an air mission brief and ice breaker. The second day consisted of demonstrations, a group photo, and the initial manifest. The third day, after breakfast, jumpers departed on the first lifts or were bused to Tamara Drop Zone. The drop zone is located at the Honduran Army Airborne School, 2do Batallión Infanteria Aero Transporte (2nd Infantry Airborne Battalion Transported (IABT)). Upon completion of all air operations, the 2nd IABT hosted a reception at their Officer’s Club. On the fourth day, the JTF-B commander planned an ABN run or walk along with other organized sporting activities. The fifth and final day was set for departures.

One cannot help but enjoy the transition from a group of individual paratroopers looking at each other as strangers on the first day, to the incredible camaraderie generated by the time they are getting ready to depart for their home stations. This is a community that refers to each other an “Hermanos

de Ceda” or Brothers of Silk. We anticipate exactly this outcome during any type of security cooperation event. These friendships will go beyond Tamara Drop Zone and into the future may play a major role in diffusing a potential conflict, or building more solid friendships.

The Iguana Voladora gathering allows SOUTHCOM to maintain partnerships within the area of emphasis. These types of combined exercises pay high-dividend for the COCOM, but not without a lot of planning by unsung heroes behind the scenes. The funding process, contacting of military groups to search for participants, vetting process by military groups, coordination with SOUTHCOM’s J-8 for funding (Developing Countries Combined Exercises Program Funds), and logistics plans are necessary to ensure the operations are safely and successfully executed.

The number of participants is determined by funds allotted and air transportation cost based on the Joint Federal Travel Regulation (JFTR) and the Defense Travel System (DTS). The military groups can consider using non-U.S. carriers in order to minimize cost since there is no requirement to transport non-U.S. nationals on U.S. air carriers.

The day prior to airborne operations Lieutenant Silva, ARFOR Commander, provided a welcome brief to all participants outlining the week’s events and rules of engagement during their stay at JTF-Brvo. Lieutenant Colonel Caceres, 2do BIAT Commander, gave a few welcoming comments. The rest of the day’s events focus was on training and familiarization with U.S. paratrooper Sustained Airborne Training and actions in the aircraft (Chinook, CH-47). After training concluded, the JTF-B public affairs office took group photos which were later framed and presented to each delegation during the airborne banquet.

Two CH-47 helicopters were designated to support the operation. Approximately half of the participants departed on the helicopters and the rest were bused to Tamara, the Honduran drop zone. Upon completion of airborne operations, Lieutenant Colonel Caceres hosted a reception at the Honduran Officer’s Club, located on a hill top with a beautiful view overlooking Tamara drop zone. Part of the activities included the ceremonial release of a caged iguana by each delegation. Colonel Hughes, JTF-B Commander, kept his iguana for display the the JTF-B headquarters sanctuary, where several iguanas from previous years are currently on display. This tradition has become a Honduran custom since the Iguana Voladora in 2004.

Iguana Voladora 2008 is currently scheduled for 28 April through 2 May 2008 with the actual jump on 20 April 2008. ARFOR will begin mailing invitations around December 2007. With this bit of information, military groups should start the vetting process for selected participants in order to minimize issues and generate a pool of personnel to choose from based on the availability of funds.

About the Author

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